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ABSTRACT

The goal of this research was to uncover the reasons for the unusual success of a small group of Korean-Americans in the American work arena. All had spent their childhood and formative years in Korea under the sole influence of Korean culture, attending the best high schools and colleges. Korean culture tends not to nurture some of the significant personal qualities which make for success in the American context. Furthermore, the American workplace itself holds for Korean females serious obstacles to success, particularly because of racial and gender discrimination. The study was designed to answer specific questions: (1) Are distinguished Korean-American women similar to American women and men who have distinguished themselves? (2) To what factors do they attribute their success? and (3) What career barriers did they encounter and how did they overcome them? The reasons given by the subjects on how they overcame barriers were hard work, being knowledgeable, and directing their energy towards achieving their goals rather than focusing on discrimination. They refused to submit themselves to debilitating negative emotions and attitudes. Having a positive attitude played a critical role in overcoming the barriers they faced. Some important implications reported in this paper are that the development and enhancement of masculine traits are important to the occupational success of women. Parental support and encouragement are important factors in the success of their daughters. It concludes that Korean-American women and women in general should anticipate certain barriers they will encounter, and need to prepare strategies to deal with them. This investigation attempted to promote a general understanding of the factors associated with women's career success. (Contains 14 references.) (JDM)

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VARIABLES REALTED TO CAREER SUCCESS: KOREAN-AMERICAN WOMEN OF DISTINCTION TELL THEIR STORIES

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Introduction

The goal of this research has been to uncover the reasons for the unusual success of a small group in the American work arena. This population consisted of a very select group of Korean-American women whose childhood and formative years were spent in Korea and under the sole influence of Korean culture. Korean culture tends not to nurture some of the significant personal qualities, which do make for success in the American context. Furthermore, the American workplace itself holds for Korean females serious obstacles to success, particularly because of racial and gender discrimination. How, then, have these women succeeded in the American workplace in the face of the dual barriers of debilitating cultural influences and serious obstacles inherent in the workplace environment itself? How is it that they came to possess the unique personal qualities, which brought them to power and influence in the American scene? Because only a few have achieved such success, it was especially significant to uncover the factors which worked for success in these few who may be regarded as role models.

Research Questions

This study was designed to answer the following specific questions:
(1) Are distinguished Korean-American women similar to American women and men who have distinguished themselves? (2) To what factors do they attribute their success? (3) What career barriers did they encounter and how did they overcome them? This investigation attempted to promote a general understanding of the factors associated with women's career success.

Subjects

Women selected to participated in this study were Korean-American women who have distinguished themselves in their respective career fields, and who met the following criteria:

1. Women who were born in Korea and came to America during or after high school.
2. Women who are currently working outside the home
3. Women who (a) have made contributions to their fields, or (b) have served or currently serve as an elected official in their professional organization or work settings, or (c) are recognized

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by their peers and others as being distinguished, or (d) have held or currently hold high executive positions, or (e) have held or currently hold positions of high esteem and were or are the first Asian to hold such a post, or (f) have earned or are earning an extremely high income and are viewed as being very successful financially.

The subjects were selected from the five major cities in the United States with substantial Korean-American populations (Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco). A total of 20 subjects met the above criteria and participated in this study.

Methods

In this study, both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed. The necessary data was gathered through: (a) structured questionnaires for demographic information, (b) in-depth personal interviews for personal experiences, and (c) administration of the Adjective Check List (ACL) inventory for personality assessment.

For the analysis of the data, demographic information was tabulated, and each transcript was analyzed individually. Statements made by the subjects which were pertinent to the research questions were noted and recorded, temporary categories were developed and a coding system similar to that descried by Strauss (1987) were developed and analyzed in order to address the research questions. For ACL personality assessment, means and standard deviation were calculated, and comparisons were made with the general population.

Findings

Research Question 1

Based on the review of the literature, compared to the average person, successful American women and men who have distinguished themselves tend to be more intelligent, to have a high need for achievement, to have a high need for power (Williams & McCullers, 1983, Schippmann & Prien, 1989, McClelland & Bburham, 1976), and they possess personality traits typically considered to be masculine, such as assertiveness, competitiveness, dominance, self-confidence, self-reliance, independence, risk taking, and adventurousness (Wong, Kettlewell, & Sproule, 1985, Bachtold,1976, Bachtold & Werner, 1972, Louis, 1981). It also shows that they have interpersonal skills. (McCall & Lombardo, 1983, Lombardo, Ruderman, & McCauley, 1988, Ansari, 1984). Other variables that seem to be somewhat related to occupational success are level of education, socioeconomic background, early family life, birth order, and the experience of having been mentored. However, the research results with respect to these variables, with the exception of education were inconclusive.

The findings of this study show that the Korean-American women of distinction in this study are remarkably similar to successful American women and men of high achievement.
All of the subjects in this study were highly intelligent and very bright. All were honor students and have excellent academic records. Most of them attended the best high schools and the most prestigious colleges and universities in Korea. All received higher education except one who did

not finish college degree due to circumstantial and external factors that prevented her from continuing her education. However, she was a straight 'A' student.

Most of the subjects exhibited the exceptional desire for high achievement. From early childhood, they were highly competitive in their academic performances and wanted to achieve the best. They were highly ambitious, motivated, and achievement oriented. "I have a high standard for myself. I have to be first or in the top, whatever I do. I work hard and I take pride in saying I did the best" was a typical response.

Many subjects played the leader role when they were young, and have been actively involved in various leadership roles both in the past and present. The subjects in this study showed their need for power in many different ways; by being the best, being in control of self and/or being in charge, influencing people and things, having freedom from control by others, making an impact, and making a difference.

Findings of this study, both from the interviews and the results of the ACL, are that most of the subjects exhibited masculine traits. From an early age and on, many of the subjects exhibited more masculine than feminine characteristics. As children, they were very outgoing, confrontive with their parents when treated unfairly, and many respondents described themselves being "tomboys" when they were young.

Interpersonal skills is another quality these subjects exhibited, again congruent with research findings.

The patience and tolerance seem to be more characteristic of Korean-American women of success than American women and men of distinction.

In regards to early family life, most of the subjects experienced a type of child rearing that has fostered their more psychologically masculine sex-typing supporting the findings of Henning & Jardim (1971) and Williams & McCullers (1983), and received much support and encouragement from their parents. Furthermore, the parents of the subjects not only held high career expectations but they also encouraged them to enter nontraditional career fields.

Research Question 2

Deaux (1979) and Deaux & Frris (1977) found that males tended to credit their success to ability, while females indicated a greater tendency to regard luck as the explanation for either success or failure. Without hesitation, the majority of the subjects largely attributed their success to hard work, to doing their best, and to their dedication to work. As a matter of fact, a few of the subjects who work in government settings resented the idea that their positions might be token ones, and said that they will not tolerate or accept such suggestion. Several subjects included parental upbringing and strong support from husband and children in their success attribute lists. They asserted that, unlike other parents in Korea, their parents held non-traditional and very liberal views of child rearing. Parents not only had high career expectations of their daughters, but they also hoped their daughters would enter nontraditional career fields. Thus, the subjects

said that from early cnildhood, their parents encouraged and supported them, and instilled in them self-confidence and the belief that they could achieve anything they desired if they were prepared to expend the required effort. This finding is consistent with the findings of Williams and McMullers (1983).

Research Question 3

Barrier encountered: subjects identified racial discrimination, gender discrimination, cultural differences, and language difficulty as barriers that they had encountered. The most prominent barriers the subjects encountered were racial and gender discrimination.

It is interesting to note that the majority of the subjects reported that being an Asian woman had both a positive and a negative impact upon their careers. And more than half of the subjects reported that they had experienced racial barriers in the beginning stages of their careers, but not necessarily in the later stages. The subjects' responses to racial and gender discrimination ranged from intense anger and frustration to very mild reactions. Societal stereotyping of foreigners and Asians as a career hindrance were mentioned. They expressed that differences in cultural background and language are often perceived by Americans in terms of deficiency. Also cited by the subjects was the perception of Asian woman as timid, shy, and feminine, therefore easily manipulated. It was this researcher's impression that most of the subjects exhibited a feminine and typically Asian female exterior, but that they were tough inside. It was as though they were lambs on the outside but tigers on the inside. Beneath their meek exteriors they were tough and extraordinarily capable and competent people. Many subjects seemed to be saying that people do not take women seriously, especially Asian women. Therefore, being an Asian woman created a double barrier for them. One subject said that the minority status of being an Asian-American woman burdened her with the requirement of having to work twice as hard to earn respect. She referred to this situation as "double Jeopardy." Many subjects expressed that only through hard work could they earn respect for their capabilities, and that they had to prove themselves again and again.
There was another stereotype of Asians mentioned. One subject stated that people perceive Asians as very able and highly intelligent. For this reason, she feels that Asians are intimidating to some who perceive them as a threat to their jobs. Being an Asian woman was both an enhancement to career opportunities and also an occupational barrier. In some cases, being Asian contributed to their career enhancement. The government's affirmative action policy has resulted in the active recruitment of capable and qualified Asians. The paradoxical factor here is that being Asian was a barrier in the beginning phase of their career but when their credentials and capabilities had been established, then being Asian became an asset. As one subject put it, "I can be used to many different ways,....I am a show piece for minority administrators."

How the subjects overcame barriers: All of the subjects in this study employed such strategies as hard work, being knowledgeable, and proving their qualifications. They directed their energy and hard work toward achieving their goals, rather than dwelling on discrimination or injustice. They refused to submit themselves to debilitating negative emotions and attitudes. They persisted with an optimistic outlook. Having a positive attitude played a critical role in overcoming the barriers they faced. Being patient and tolerant were another strategy they

employed to overcome the barriers. With their optimism, positive outlook, and self-confidence, they turned negative experiences of discrimination into a positive force. For them, discrimination became a motivating factor for achievement and success. For many of them, their ethnic pride and self-respect made it important to them to show Americans how good they are, and thereby reflect positively on all Koreans. It was apparent that to many of the Korean-American women in this study, their success was intimately intertwined with the success of their family, and, furthermore, with the success of their native country. They were determined to be winners and thereby to honor their family and their native country. Pride is very important to many Koreans, and this often becomes a powerful motivating factor for many Korean-Americans. To achieve this goal, they endured many hardships with patience and tolerance, and concentrated their energy on working hard. And this is the exact strategy that these subjects employed to overcome the occupational barriers they encountered.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

Several practical implications and recommendations may be derived from this study for Korean-American women and women in general, present and future, who elect to enter and strive for success in the world of work. These implications and recommendations have relevance for parents, teachers, counselors, and anyone assisting them. They are:

1. This study suggests that the development and enhancement of masculine traits are important to the occupational success of females. In American society the masculine characteristic of assertiveness, competitiveness, dominance, self-confidence, self-reliance, independence, risk taking, and adventurousness are positively related to occupational success. Therefore, child rearing-practices that foster more psychologically masculine sex-typing need to be practiced by parents. Traditional sex-role stereotypes imposed upon daughters during childhood could result in the nurturance of feminine traits that would be a clear disadvantage for achieving career success in a competitive society.
2. Interpersonal skills should be taught from a very early age and continue.
3. Parental encouragement and support are important in facilitating the career achievement of daughters. Therefore, from an early age on, self-confidence and high self-esteem should be instilled through support and encouragement.
4. The high expectations of parents in terms of educational attainment and occupational achievement seem to be an important factor in their children's career success. The self-fulfilling prophecy is a very potent force. It is recommended that parents, teachers, and counselors set, whenever possible, high expectations of their daughters and their students.
5. One's educational level is one of the variables for occupational success. Parents, teachers, counselors, and anyone who is assisting children and adults should encourage them to achieve a college education, and perhaps even an advanced degree.
6. The ability to maintain a positive attitude toward oneself and toward one's work appears to be a factor for success.
7. The Korean-American women and women in general need to anticipate certain barriers she will encounter: racial and gender discrimination, cultural differences, and for those who were not born in America, language difficulties. They need to prepare strategies to overcome such barriers.

It would be interesting to repeat this research with other ethnic minority groups. Such studies would stimulate and enhance further understanding of women's career development.

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